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A first field report on Nachiring (Kiranti)

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ABSTRACT

The Nachiring language belongs to the Kiranti branch of the Trans-Himalayan language family (a.k.a. Tibeto-Burman or Sino-Tibetan) and is spoken in the Himalayan foothills of eastern Nepal. Within the Kiranti branch, Nachiring has been classified as belonging to the Khambu unit of the Central Kiranti subgroup, but no linguistic fieldwork has been undertaken so far and the language remains undocumented and undescribed. The present paper constitutes a first sociolinguistic survey of the Nachiring language, based on an initial field trip, and presents updates on the number of speakers, location, language usage and attitude, as well as a first linguistic inspection of the relationship between Nachiring and the closely related Kulung language. Nachiring is a highly endangered language and thus in severe need of linguistic documentation.

KEYWORDS

Nachiring, Kiranti, Trans-Himalayan/Tibeto-Burman, field report, language endangerment, Khambu, Kulung

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A first field report on Nachiring (Kiranti)¹

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1 Introduction

The Nachiring language is an undocumented and undescribed language of eastern Nepal. It belongs to the Trans-Himalayan language family and is a member of the Kiranti subgroup. The name *Nachiring* functions both as ethnic and as linguistic designation and is pronounced as [natchirin]. The first mentions and word lists of the language are found in Hodgson (1857) and Hodgson (1880). In the Linguistic Survey of India by Grierson (1909: 365–366) Nachiring occurs as ‘Nāchherēng’. Later, based on data collected during the Linguistic Survey of Nepal carried out in the 1980s, Hanson (1991: 71) mentions several names of the language, e.g. ‘Nachering’, ‘Nachhereng’, ‘Nacchering’, ‘Nasring’ or ‘Bangdale’ (as derived from the village Bangdel, see below). In more recent literature, Nachiring is briefly discussed in van Driem (2001), while Tolsma (2006: 4) also mentions Nachiring, but as we will see below, the respective passage does not refer to Nachiring proper.

Nachiring occurs in the Ethnologue (Simons/Fennig 2017) under the heading ‘Nachering’ with ISO 639-3 ‘ncd’. Other names of the language presented in the Ethnologue derive from respective village names, such as Bangdeli, Rakhali or Parali, which designate the place of origin of the speakers (cf. also van Driem 2001: 700). Further, Ethnologue describes Nachiring as having 10’000 speakers, an EGIDS-level² of 7 (‘shifting’) and being the language of a recognized indigenous nationality (Rai). It is also noted that the degree of nepalization is high and that language retention is limited. Concerning its relationship within other Kiranti languages, Ethnologue classifies Nachiring as eastern Kiranti³ and as having high comprehension with Kulung in the north and Sampang in the south. Recently, a sociolinguistic survey of Nachiring has been reported to the current Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LinSuN) presenting some information about language use,

¹ I would like to thank Pascal Gerber, George van Driem, Elena Moser, Sara Rüfenacht, Corinne Mittaz and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions on a draft of this paper. I am especially grateful to Tej Bahadur Nachiring, Pratap Singh Nachiring and Kiran Nachiring, as well as the whole *Kirat Rodu Nachhiring Sakkham* for their highly valuable assistance and support.

² EGIDS is the abbreviation used in the Ethnologue for ‘Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale’ and is a means of measuring language endangerment (cf. Simons/Fennig 2017).

³ This classification is based on Michailovsky (1994), but may be somewhat confusing since Nachiring is not grouped with the eastern Kiranti subgroup in other sources (e.g. van Driem 2001; Opgenort 2005), but as central Kiranti, within which it forms the Khambu unit together with Kulung, Sampang and Sām (see below), as opposed to the eastern Kiranti branch in these classifications, i.e. including Yakkha, Athpare, Chiling, Lohorung, Yamphu and Mewahang.

multilingualism and language vitality on the basis of sociolinguistic questionnaires (Regmi/Thakur 2015). The results of this survey will be reviewed below.

The present field report aims at presenting first linguistic and sociolinguistic information on Nachiring and at undertaking a revision of the demographic information given in the Ethnologue. The following sections will discuss the exact location of the Nachiring language (section 2), the number of speakers and degree of language retention (section 3), language usage and language attitude (section 4). In a second part in section 5, a first linguistic inspection will focus on the linguistic relationship to the closely related language Kulung. In the discussion (section 6), we will summarize the sociolinguistic situation of Nachiring and its degree of endangerment.

The data used for this paper were collected during a first field trip which has been conducted in February 2017, supplemented with additional information collected in winter 2018.⁴ The field trip aimed at providing the most recent survey of the Nachiring speaking area by touching the cornerstones of the core linguistic region. The following villages have been visited: Aiselukharka, Hume, Para, Bakachol, Badel, Bangdel, Rakha and Sumtel. All Nachiring data presented in this paper are from my own notes. Kulung data stem from the grammar by Tolsma (2006). Information about number of speakers, language retention, usage and attitude has been collected through own observation and informal interviews with the speakers. Some additional demographic data have been provided by the *Kirat Rodu Nachhiring Sakham*, the ‘Kirat Nachhiring Indigenous peoples Organization’ in Kathmandu.⁵

2 Location

Nachiring is spoken in eastern Nepal, in the Khotang district within Province Nr. 1, the former Sagarmatha zone. Within Khotang district, the language is nowadays found to be spoken in the former Aiselukharka, Bakachol and Rakha-Bangdel VDCs⁶ or in the corresponding wards in nowadays’s Aiselukharka *gaunpalika* ‘Rural municipality’. Most Nachiring speaking villages lie on the eastern and western slopes of the Lidim⁷ valley, a few also on the northern slopes of the Rawa valley. Fluent speakers of Nachiring are only found in the villages of Badel, Bangdel and Rakha in the Lidim valley. A few individual speakers are found in Aiselukharka, Para and Sumtel.

The map in figure 1 displays the core region where Nachiring is still spoken today. In 2017, the motorable road ended at Aiselukharka, which is around 2300 meters above sea level and lies at the western border of the Nachiring speaking area, but the road is being extended to reach also Badel and Rakha in 2018. Most Nachiring villages were reachable only by foot until 2018 and lie between 1500–2300 meters above sea level. From Aiselukharka it is a 5–6 hours walk to Badel, passing Para and Hume and crossing the Bang river. Badel is the last village upstream the Lidim valley. Going from Aiselukharka to Para, one passes the sacred peak of the Nachiring people called *Pomlalu* which

⁴The field work on Nachiring is conducted in the context of my Ph.D. dissertation, the goal of which is to document and describe the Nachiring language by producing a grammar, dictionary and text collection of Nachiring.

⁵Note that the local transliteration writes ‘Nachhiring’ based on the Hunterian (Indic) transliteration of aspirated voiceless palatal affricates as ‘chh’.

⁶VDC refers to ‘Village Development Committee’ and represented the lowest administrative units or village bodies of Nepal before the new constitution was put in place in 2017.

⁷The name of this river occurs in different forms, e.g. *Lidim*, *Liding* or *Lidu*. Nachiring informants state that the original name was *Lidu*, which is also the designation of the river occurring in the ritual register of Nachiring, but then became *Lidim*, which is now the widely used name among the Nachiring themselves.

is believed to be the last refuge of the souls of deceased Nachiring. It is visible from all the villages of the Lidim river valley and is the only patch of blank rock on the whole slope. From Badel, the villages of Bangdel and Rakha are reachable within 2-3 hours by crossing the Lidim river. Rakha and Sumtel lie on the flattened top of the eastern slope of the Lidim river which expands into a smaller hill named *Pikripcho*⁸ leading down to the confluence of the Lidim and the Rawa rivers. *Pikripcho* is a sacred hill to the Nachiring and has been the ritual place for cow sacrifices in the olden days. Rakha and Sumtel lie at a lower altitude and experience a hotter and drier climate than the other villages on the western slope of the valley. The Lidim river is a natural boundary of the Nachiring area which is harder to cross in the summer months than in winter.⁹ The Lidim separates the villages Aiselukharka, Para and Badel on the west from Bangdel, Rakha and Sumtel in the east. This separation is reflected in the dialectal variation within Nachiring between the variety spoken in Badel on the one hand and the variety spoken in Rakha on the other hand.

From the southeast, Rakha and Sumtel are reachable by foot from Baksila within 4 hours by crossing the Rawa river. Baksila and Aiselukharka are reachable within a 14 hours jeep drive from the capital city Kathmandu.

Contrary to the information in van Driem (2001: 700, 706) and in the Ethnologue (Simons/Fennig 2017), the current Nachiring speaking area is much smaller and more delimited. Van Driem (2001: 700) additionally lists the village Hulu lying further north at the Honggu river and the villages Dimma and Dharapani as being native Nachiring area, cf. figure 1. Similarly, Ethnologue additionally mentions the villages Dharapani, Dipsun and Bakachol. However, the Nachiring language is not spoken anymore in Dharapani, Dipsun, Dimma or Bakachol and has been replaced by the dominant lingua franca Nepali.

⁸ The name *Pikripcho* literally means ‘the hill top where cows are cut’, from *pi* ‘cow’, *krip-* ‘to cut, to sacrifice’ and *cho* ‘peak’. Nowadays, the name is often shortened in everyday speech to *Pipicho* or even *Pipicha*, thus losing its transparent etymology.

⁹ Since my first trip in 2017, a new footbridge has been built connecting Badel and Bangdel, thus enabling a smoother crossing of the Lidim.

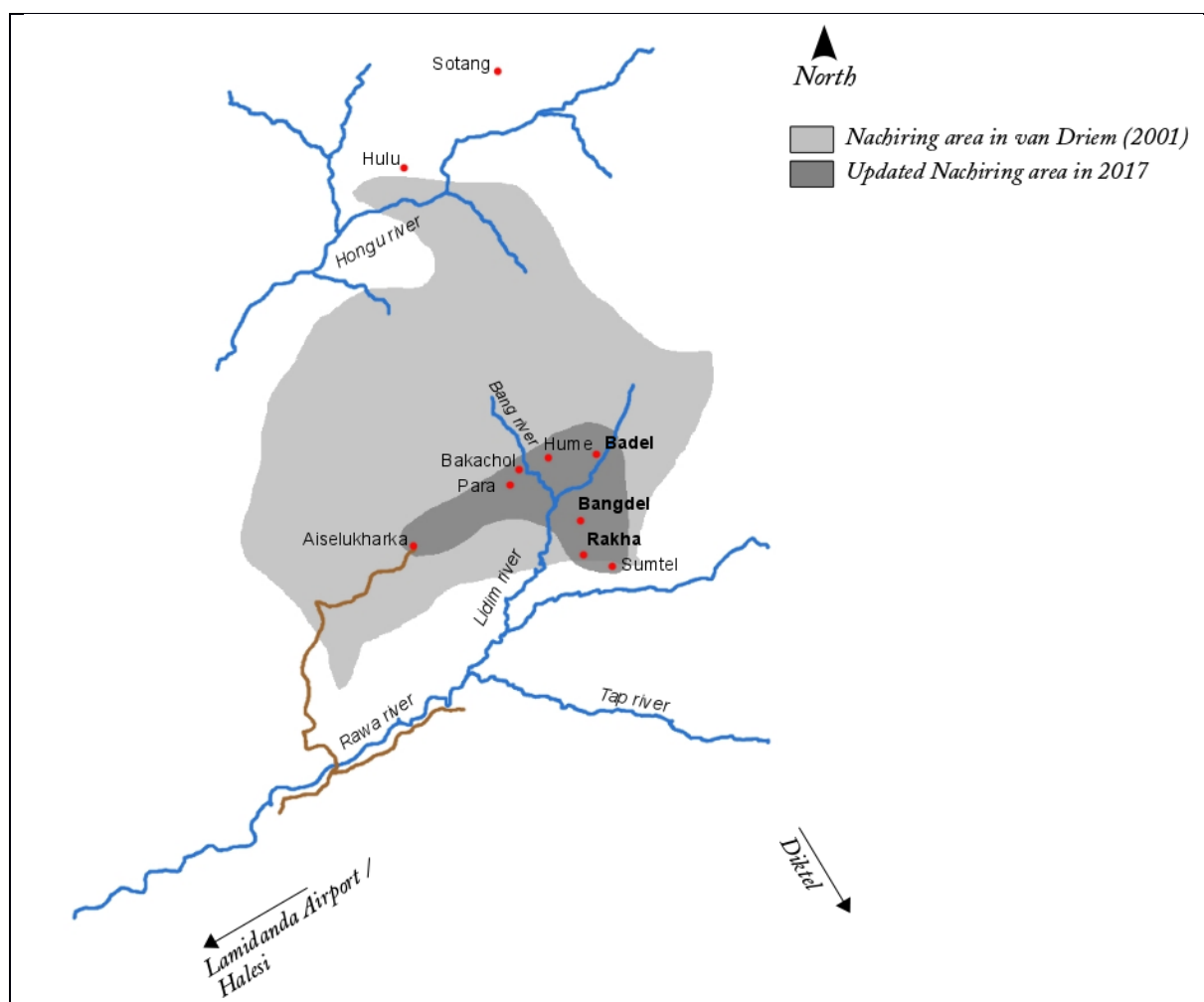


Figure 1. Map of Nachiring speaking area

The case of the Hulu village is different from the above villages, since the language spoken there is not Nachiring, but probably a dialect of Kulung with some Nachiring influences (see section 5 below). Similarly, the language of the village Sotang located close to Hulu is called Sottoring and is considered to be a dialect of Kulung (cf. van Driem 2001: 700; Tolsma 2006: 4). Although this variety is sometimes spoken by people who consider themselves (ethnic) Nachiring, it is not identical and should not be confused with the Nachiring language of the Lidim river valley.¹⁰ Some Nachiring speakers state that the language of Sotang and Hulu has been ‘mixed’ with Kulung. This observation is probably not too farfetched since the original Nachiring territory probably spread over at least Hulu, perhaps also Sotang, thus leading to a concentrated contact situation at the northern border with Kulung which might have resulted in linguistic interferences.

As we can see on the map in figure 1, the region of Nachiring has decreased extensively in comparison with the region assumed in van Driem (2001: 706). The question remains, whether the

¹⁰ There is no linguistic description of Sottoring, but it would be interesting to examine the dialectal differences between Kulung, Sottoring and Nachiring.

expansion of the Nachiring in van Driem (2001: 706) was overestimated or whether the language has declined in the last years. In both cases, the situation of the Nachiring language is precarious.

3 Number of speakers and language retention

The number of speakers of Nachiring is not easy to estimate, since the notion of Nachiring ethnicity is often not differentiated from the linguistic command of the Nachiring language and thus can be highly misleading. There are many more ethnic Nachiring than fluent Nachiring speakers and their identification with their ethnicity is very strong. An additional problem for an accurate estimation of number of speakers arises with people considering themselves ethnic Nachiring, but speaking Kulung or Sottoring (see section 2 above). Furthermore, there is a huge grey area of semi-speakers, passive understanders or rememberers of Nachiring who know only a few words. In counting, I have tried to differentiate between these passive understanders and true speakers who are able to use Nachiring in most situations in a fluent and self-evident way.

In general, Nachiring is a medium of communication only in the three villages of Badel, Bangdel and Rakha. In other villages it is not commonly used. Scattered speakers are found in Para and Sumtel and only three speakers were encountered in Aiselukharka. Probably misguided by the inclusion of ethnic but non-fluent Nachiring, the Ethnologue assumes 10,000 L1 users of the Nachiring language (Simons/Fennig 2017) on the basis of the Nepal Census 2011 data (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012; Yadava 2014). This count has to be revised drastically. Excluding semi-speakers and passive understanders, the number of fluent speakers in the whole Nachiring area does not exceed 100 speakers. It is estimated that there are some additional 300–400 passive speakers or semi-speakers.

Reasons why Nachiring occurs with 10,000 speakers in the Nepal Census 2011 may be the following. The question used in the Census asks ‘What are the mother tongue and second language of ... (a given respondent)’, i.e. the question ‘seeks a response on the mother tongue acquired from parents during childhood’ (Yadava 2014: 52). What seems likely to happen, at least in my experience, is that people tend to stress their ethnic identity and origin when asked about their mother tongue, but do not necessarily refer to their linguistic proficiency in that language. They are Nachiring and their parents or grandparents spoke Nachiring, so their mother tongue should be Nachiring too, but they do not explicitly reflect upon their linguistic competence and usage of the language. It is thus assumable that answers given to the Census 2011 question above do not refer to the actual linguistic proficiency but to the self-indicated ethnolinguistic affiliation.

In addition, a rise of consciousness about the ethnolinguistic origin can be observed among the indigenous minorities in Nepal during the last decades. This is reflected in the steady increase of number of languages counted in the Censuses from 1991 to 2011. After the assimilation policy during the Panchayat system was weakened since the restoration of democracy in 1990, indigenous minorities experience a rise of self-consciousness and strive for official recognition (cf. Yadava 2014: 53). This may have led to an additional emphasis of their indigenous ethnolinguistic identity when asked by official representatives of the government, especially if these officials are themselves high-caste Hindus and thus symbolic representatives of the former ruling caste. It is therefore conceivable that socio-political reasons may account for a certain ethnolinguistic dissociation, reflected in the high number of Nachiring mother tongue speakers in the Census 2011.

Nachiring language retention is highest in the three villages of Badel, Bangdel and Rakha. However, the situation is highly critical even in these villages. Based on data collected in the 1980s, Hanßon (1991: 73) writes:

In most places, Nachering [sic] appears to be a vanishing idiom. The degree of Nepalization is very high. Language retention among the younger generation (only to a small extent) appears to be limited to the panchayats of Bakachol and Rakha Bangdel; [...]

These former panchayats correspond to the region where language retention is also highest today. Hanßon (1991: 73) estimates the number of speakers not to exceed 2,000. Given these statements about the vitality of Nachiring from over thirty years ago, it seems highly implausible to assume a sudden growth from roughly 2,000 to 10,000 L1 speakers as given e.g. by the Ethnologue.

The demographic distribution of language competence and usage is shown in table 1. There is a clear correlation with age. Active speakers who speak the language naturally and fluently are all above the age of 50, if not above 60. However, this correlation does not hold in the other direction, i.e. not all people above 50 or 60 are fluent speakers, but only some. Younger speakers between 30–50 years of age might have a passive understanding of the language, but do not have the proficiency to actively use it. Several mid-generation speakers only know a few words of salient cultural and everyday phrases. The generation between 15–30 years falls into this group too. There is no speaker younger than 15 years and no child acquires the language, neither naturally nor in school settings.

Competence	Age (in years)
fluent speakers, natural language usage in every communicative context, 50+ / 60+ but also considerable use of Nepali	
semi-speakers, passive understanders, understand more or less everything, but are not competent and fluent speakers	30–50
know and understand only scattered words and phrases	15–30
no understanding	0–15

Table 1. Demographic distribution of language competence

This distribution has important implications. The generation of young parents, i.e. aged 20–35 years, already does not have enough linguistic competence of Nachiring to pass the language to their offspring. Nachiring should thus be regarded as a moribund language, since the natural transmission of the language is interrupted. The only chance for intergenerational transmission is the mediation of the language through the grandparents which are often competent speakers of Nachiring. However, it was observed that even highly fluent and natural L1 speakers of the grandparents' generation do not speak Nachiring to their grandchildren, but choose Nepali instead. When asked why they do not speak Nachiring with the children, they stated that the children would not understand the language. Thus, the process of language replacement is already so advanced that

even fluent speakers do not see any point in talking or teaching their native language to their children or grandchildren. The issue of language usage will be further discussed below in section 4.

Outside the Nachiring homeland in the Lidim valley, Nachiring people can be found in other areas of Nepal as a result of recent urban migration. Several ethnic Nachiring have migrated to Ilam, Morang, Sankhuwasabha, Panchthar and Bhojpur districts and to the capital city Kathmandu. According to the *Kirat Rodu Nachhiring Sakham*, the ‘Kirat Nachhiring Indigenous peoples Organization’, in Kathmandu, there are some additional ten fluent speakers of Nachiring in Kathmandu and 25–30 additional fluent speakers in other diaspora, mostly in the Terai (see table 2). The majority of the diaspora speakers are more than 50 years old. Table 2 summarises the total amount of Nachiring speakers.¹¹

	Fluent speakers	Passive/semi-speakers
Nachiring homeland	max. 100	300–400
Kathmandu	max. 10	unknown
other diaspora	max. 25–30	unknown
Total	max. 140	400+

Table 2. Number of speakers

¹¹ These numbers stand in opposition to what is reported in the sociolinguistic survey on Nachiring, where it is stated that language vitality is high (cf. Regmi/Thakur 2015: 38–39). The study presented there is based on questionnaires where a selected number of Nachiring people, roughly 40 individuals, are asked about language vitality and usage. The main question from which the statement of high language vitality is derived is ‘Do all your children speak your mother tongue?’, which 68% answered with ‘yes’. However, this question does not relate to the respective age of the children. The conclusion from these answers would only be indicative if the respective children would be infants. However, it is possible or even highly likely that these ‘children’ are already grown-ups, themselves parents or even above 50 years old. In my field trips, I have not met one single child speaking Nachiring or knowing even a few Nachiring words. All of them only speak Nepali. Again, this contradicts the sociolinguistic survey which reports that ‘most of the Nachhiring children do not understand Nepali’ (Regmi/Thakur 2015: 75), which is simply counterfactual. In sum, the sociolinguistic report touches on some important points, i.e. that the Nachiring have a very positive attitude towards their native language and that all Nachiring also speak Nepali (see section 4.1), but unfortunately it misrepresents some points due to methodological problems. These problems mainly concern the fact that data from self-reflexive questionnaires are taken as a basis for the evaluation of the sociolinguistic situation of Nachiring. Although certainly valuable and interesting, self-reflexion not always represents the sociolinguistic reality in a neutral and objective way. This is especially the case if socio-political tensions played a role in the history of the ethnolinguistic group in question. Like the rise of awareness led to emphasis of the own ethnolinguistic identity in the history of the national Censuses, information given in the questionnaires may represent a slightly blurred or over-emphasised version of the sociolinguistic reality. In the analysis of several answers, it is unfortunately often not differentiated between what the speakers desire or wish for their language and what is observed by the linguists.

4 Language usage, attitude and development

In the preceding section we have summarised the number and distribution of Nachiring speakers. In the following sections we will discuss the usage of the Nachiring language among fluent speakers and the sociolinguistic attitude of the Nachiring people towards their language.

4.1 Language usage

Nepali has become the main language of communication in the Nachiring homeland and the degree of Nepalization is remarkably high. All ethnic Nachiring speak Nepali as their first or second language. Some of the Nachiring also have some knowledge of another Kiranti language, mostly people of mixed Kiranti familiar background, e.g. Dumi, Khaling, Thulung, Camling or Sampang (cf. Regmi/Thakur 2015: 29). There are no monolingual Nachiring speakers.

The main medium of communication in everyday life is Nepali, which is the default language in any interfamiliar meeting of Nachiring people. This is even the case if the community gathers for a traditional Nachiring wedding with families whom everybody knows to be Nachiring and who (theoretically) speak the language. In Badel or Rakha, the language spoken in gatherings of close family members are occasionally in Nachiring, but in the vast majority of cases Nepali is spoken. Nepali serves also as the metalanguage for discussing issues about Nachiring culture or language. The usage of Nachiring constitutes ‘marked communication’. Even elderly speakers are not used to speaking Nachiring and always fall back into Nepali when they are not paying attention, as in the case of two octogenarian brothers in Badel who are fluent speakers and knowledgeable of archaic linguistic features or traditional songs, but who spoke together Nepali per default. In general, code switching with Nepali is a very prominent issue. Even in the case of fluent Nachiring speakers, the conversation will always contain Nepali insertions or even intra-sentential code-switching.

The usage of the Nachiring language in cultural ceremonies and rituals is one of the contexts where the language is required.¹² However, the cultural and linguistic knowledge of the ceremonies is decreasing. At one occasion, it was observed that discussions about which ritual and recitation should come next were necessary, the discussions themselves having been conducted completely in Nepali.

In general, among the few Nachiring still speaking the language, there is an alarming tendency to forget basic vocabulary, such as the numerals and other everyday lexemes, and basic morphological structures, such as forms of the complex verbal paradigms, and to lose or replace the pragmatic and stylistic finesses with the corresponding Nepali terms or constructions. Nachiring thus shows many characteristics of a severely endangered language.

4.2 Language attitude and ethnic identity

Generally, there is a very positive attitude to their native language among the Nachiring. Even school children express a desire to learn the language. Grown-ups usually have a strong

¹² It could not yet be determined to what extent the Nachiring ritual language *Muddhum* was used in these contexts. Ritual languages are found in various Kiranti languages, cf. for example Allen (1978) for Thulung, Gaenszle (2002) for Mewahang or I. P. Rai et al. (2009) for Chintang. They make use of a rather diverging lexicon and are used by shamans and in rituals, as opposed to the plain language of everyday communication. In the case of the attended Nachiring wedding, however, it seemed that the language was not different from the spoken one and that every speaker could follow and use it easily. However, some songs were collected where the ritual language was used. More research will be conducted on this topic in future field trips.

understanding of their cultural and ethnic identity and will exhibit a healthy and even proud self-confidence of being a Nachiring. Nachiring identity and origin is generally not hidden or rejected, at least not in the Nachiring homeland. Migrated Nachiring people living in other parts of Nepal report that their language is sometimes considered by outsiders as rustic and that they sometimes feel ashamed to speak it.

Although the Nachiring people are of Rai ethnicity, they now wish to establish an independent recognition, both politically and socially. The Rai are an officially recognized minority group in Nepal, but *Rai* is only a generic term for about thirty linguistically and ethnically different groups within Kiranti.¹³ The Nachiring community, represented by the *Kirat Rodu Nachiring Sakham*, strives for recognition as an individual ethnic group. As a consequence, many Nachiring are now replacing their ethnic surname *Rai* with *Nachiring* and are even applying for an official change of their surname.¹⁴ They feel suppressed by being lumped together with other groups.

Nepalization, thus, does not seem to stem from conscious suppression of their own identity but rather as a consequence of the overall nepalization of the region. As van Driem (2001: 700) states correctly: ‘Because of the influx of Aryan colonists and Newar refugees and settlers in the wake of the Gorkhā conquest, the Nachiring have become a minority in their own homeland [. . .]’. The villages of the Nachiring region are all ethnically mixed, besides the Nachiring there are Bahun, Chetris, Newar, Tamang or Sherpa, some of them with their own native language, but all of them speaking Nepali which features as the lingua franca of everyday communication. The degree of nepalization is so high that its role as lingua franca is not delimited to interethnic communication, e.g. between Newars and Nachiring, but includes even communication within the Nachiring community (see above).

4.3 *Language development*

The Nachiring community is enthusiastic about developing their language. The *Kirat Rodu Nachiring Sakham* is an active organisation meeting once per week, encouraging and patronising linguistic work on Nachiring. For example, the organisation has proposed an orthography for Nachiring based on the Devanagari script. On the basis of this orthography, literature and poetry has been published in the Nachiring language, e.g. P. S. Nachiring (VS 2073). A small Nachiring–Nepali dictionary has been published a few months ago (T. Nachiring VS 2073), while in another recent publication, the community has collected Nachiring mythology and rites which have been written down in Nachiring, Nepali and English (H. Nachiring/S. Nachiring VS 2074). Older publications in Nepali focus on some aspects of the Nachiring language and on the genealogy of the Nachiring people (P. S. Nachiring VS 2061). Additionally, a Master’s thesis on the Nachiring language and culture has been crafted in Nepali by R. K. Rai (VS 2066). In sum, the Nachiring community is quite active when it comes to language development and willing to contribute to the linguistic documentation of the language, since they are themselves well aware of the severe endangerment of their language.

¹³ The term *Rai* is used with different meanings in different sources, e.g. Grierson (1909: 373–381), Shafer (1974) or (van Driem 2001: 602). In the discussion of the Nepal Census 2011 data, *Rai* appears both as a cover term and as an individual language (cf. Yadava 2014: 56–60). The listing of Rai as an own language on position 15 within the ‘major languages’ of Nepal as having 159,114 speakers (Yadava 2014: 57) is linguistically confusing, since there is no individual Rai language.

¹⁴ Similar processes can be observed within other Rai groups, such as the Mewahang.

Despite this positive activity and attitude of the Nachiring organisation, the language is poorly developed in other terms. There are no school or teaching materials available and the language is by not taught in any institutional education. No comprehensive linguistic documentation and description of the language has been done so far. Concerning governmental status and representation, the Nachiring language (and ethnicity) is included within the Rai minority, which constitutes an official minority group in Nepal. However, this is a highly misleading conception of the legal conditions of the individual Rai groups. As mentioned above, the term *Rai* does not refer to a single ethnolinguistic group, but constitutes a cover term for around thirty distinct languages and ethnicities within Kiranti. None of these individual groups are recognized minorities or governmentally protected and future developments in this direction are not expectable, to say the least. One of the major points of the *Kirat Rodu Nachiring Sakham* is that they feel ‘rai-ised’ by the government of Nepal and that their original identity has been neglected in that they were subsumed under the term *Rai*. This point is missed in the Ethnologue article on Nachiring, where its status is classified as ‘language of recognized indigenous nationality: Rai’, and should therefore be revised.

5 A first comparative inspection of Nachiring

In the second part of this report, first linguistic observations of Nachiring from a comparative point of view will be presented. The closest linguistic relatives of Nachiring are Kulung, Sampang and Sām, which together form the Khambu unit within the Central Kiranti branch (cf. van Driem 2001; Opgenort 2005). The linguistic closeness to Kulung or Sampang are observed by the Nachiring themselves, although they will tend to stress the differences and not the similarities between these ethnolinguistic groups and themselves. While there is a grammar of the Kulung language available (Tolsma 2006), no comprehensive linguistic accounts on Sampang or Sām have been published.¹⁵ Because of this lack of data, the following investigation will focus on the relationship between Nachiring and Kulung.

The Nachiring language has been reported as being closely related to Kulung in the literature (cf. van Driem 2001; Tolsma 2006). While the linguistic proximity of the two languages is out of question, the details of their relationship, and also their relationship to Sottoring, as well as to Sampang and Sām, needs more detailed and careful investigations. Differences in lexicon and especially phonology and grammar are already well observable.

Claims about people who call themselves Nachiring speaking only a dialect of Kulung must be revised, since they are based on a wrong understanding of the Nachiring homeland and language. Tolsma (2006: 4) refers to Nachiring as the language of the village of Hulu, which lies very close to the Kulung speaking area, but relatively far away from the Nachiring centre, see figure 1. As we have seen above, there are ethnic Nachiring settlers in Hulu, but their language is not the Nachiring language spoken way further south in the Lidim river valley. Here again, ethnic and linguistic Nachiring should not be confused. The language spoken in Hulu might well be a dialect of Kulung or Sottoring, but is not identical with Nachiring proper spoken in the Lidim valley. Hanßon (1991: 74) also notes that the label ‘Nacchhering [sic]’ is sometimes used for the Sotang variety of Kulung.

¹⁵ There is uncertainty whether *Sām* designates an independent language, since the Nachiring are not aware of a language with this name being closely related to theirs. Additionally, other Rai people informed me that the name *Sām* is used by the Kulung to refer to the Mewahang, which might point towards an exonymic origin of the designation *Sām*. More research on this issue is planned by Pascal Gerber and myself.

The author is further very clear about differentiating Kulung-Sotang on the one hand as a compact cluster of dialects and Nachiring as a separate language on the other hand, but as the closest relative of Kulung-Sotang (cf. Hanson 1991: 50). In addition to this, it has been observed that the name *Nachiring* will often be interpreted as being a synonym for Kulung by other Kiranti groups, such as the Mewahang (Pascal Gerber, p.c.). The awareness of an own ethnolinguistic group Nachiring is thus not high, even within Kiranti.

Tolsma (2006: 1–2) offers an insight on the differences between Kulung and the Sotang dialect of Kulung, i.e. Sottoring. He lists some sound correspondences, i.e. the change from Kulung long /u:/ before /e/ to /i:/ in Sottoring or the secondary vowel length in Sottoring resulting from consonant cluster reduction, e.g. Kulung *moks* ‘son-in-law’ compared to *mo:s* in Sottoring. Interestingly, Nachiring exhibits similarities to both Kulung and Sottoring, but also own innovations. Table 3 presents some of the data provided in Tolsma (2006: 2), supplemented with the corresponding Nachiring lexemes.¹⁶

In the following, we will have a short preliminary look at the phonology, morphology and lexicon of Nachiring and Kulung. Needless to say that this short discussion will merely scratch the surface.

	Nachiring	Sottoring	Kulung
bone	<i>tupru</i>	<i>tipri</i>	<i>tupri</i>
eye	<i>mus</i>	<i>mu:s</i>	<i>muks</i>
knee	<i>tumtsho</i>	<i>timtshi</i>	<i>tumtshi</i>
tooth	<i>kə</i>	<i>kɛŋ</i>	<i>kaŋ</i>
chin	<i>dauli</i>	<i>dauli</i>	<i>daulu</i>
water	<i>kou ~ kəu</i>	<i>kou</i>	<i>kau</i>
salt	<i>rum</i>	<i>rim</i>	<i>rum</i>
it is	<i>tu-da</i>	<i>ti:-e</i>	<i>tu:-e</i>
one	<i>u(k)-</i>	<i>i:bim</i>	<i>i:bum</i>
beautiful	<i>khanup</i>	<i>ŋalilop</i>	<i>ŋaliləp</i>
grandmother	<i>muma</i>	<i>moma</i>	<i>məma</i>
grandfather	<i>phupa</i>	<i>phopa</i>	<i>phəpa</i>

¹⁶ Some Nachiring lexemes, such as the words for ‘water’, ‘tomorrow’ and ‘whereto’, exhibit dialectal variation. The two lexemes for ‘when’ correspond to two meanings, *hadelo* referring to events in the past, *hadem* to events in the future.

tomorrow	<i>sala ~ sela</i>	<i>sela</i>	<i>desa</i>
when	<i>hadelo, hadem</i>	<i>ha:le:</i>	<i>ha:de:</i>
whereto, whither	<i>haki ~ ki</i>	<i>ha:loi</i>	<i>da:loi</i>

Table 3. Comparison of Nachiring with Sottoring and Kulung, after Tolsma (2006: 2), supplemented with Nachiring data

The phoneme inventory of Nachiring as compared to the phoneme inventory of Kulung (cf. Tolsma 2006: 11–20) exhibits several differences, both in consonantal and vocalic segments. The consonant inventory of Nachiring shows bilabial, dental and velar places of articulation for the plosive series with aspirated and non-aspirated pairing for both voiced and voiceless stops. Kulung lacks the voiced aspirated stops. Three nasals, at the bilabial, dental and velar place of articulation are found in Nachiring, identically in Kulung. Only two fricatives are found in both languages, a dental-alveolar /s/ and a glottal fricative /h/ or /ɦ/, although Nachiring exhibits an interesting, but probably subphonemic alternation between an alveolar sibilant [s] and a palato-alveolar fricative [ɕ]. The four glides of Nachiring are identical to the glides of Kulung, i.e. a labiovelar /w/, a dental lateral /l/, a palatal glide /j/ and a rhotic tap /ɾ/.

The vowel inventory of Nachiring exhibits seven phonemic segments: /i/, /e/, /a/, /u/, /o/, /ə/ and /u/. The low vowel /a/ is extremely fronted. The central vowel /ə/ is somewhere between [ə] and a back mid-open rounded vowel [ɔ]. The high back unrounded vowel /u/ is sometimes articulated as [i], but then again almost merges with /u/ with some speakers. Kulung lacks the high back unrounded vowel.

Some preliminary sound correspondences between Nachiring and Kulung are observable. Table 4 presents selected correspondences of Nachiring and Kulung cognates. Vocalic correspondences between /u/ in Nachiring and /i/ in Kulung and /ə/ in Nachiring and /o/ in Kulung, as well as /i/ in Nachiring and /e/ in Kulung seem to be widespread and regular. Voiced aspirated plosives can be found in Nachiring where Kulung exhibits voiced unaspirated counterparts, e.g. /bh/ vs. /b/. Loss of final velar nasal /ŋ/ in Nachiring is widespread. The conditioning environments of the sound changes behind these correspondences will be defined and described in more detail in future research.

The sound correspondences between /ɾ/ in Nachiring and /g/ in Kulung, e.g. Nachiring *ram* ‘body’ and Kulung *gam* ‘body’, is interesting from a comparative point of view, especially if we consider the overlap of this correspondence with the correspondence /ɾ/ in Nachiring and /ɾ/ in Kulung, for example Nachiring *ruu* ‘language’ and Kulung *riŋ* ‘language’ or Nachiring *remma* ‘to stand’ and Kulung *(tho) remma* ‘to stand’. This overlap has already been noted in the literature and caused Kirantologists to postulate a second rhotic sound for the Proto-Kiranti language, i.e. */ɾ/ vs. */ɾ/ (or */ɻ/ or */x/) (cf. van Driem 2001: 618). Van Driem (2001) speculates, based on the data presented in Shafer (1974: 149), that the two rhotic sounds might still be differentiated in Nachiring and gives the examples *hres-* ‘to laugh’, from */ɾ/, vs. *rep-* ‘to stand’, from */ɾ/, corresponding to Kulung *ges-* ‘to laugh’ and *(tho) remma* ‘to stand’. The phonetic distinction between two rhotic sounds in Nachiring assumed by Shafer (1974) and van Driem (2001) could not yet be confirmed based on the collected data, but will be the focus of further phonetic and phonological investigation. Even if the two rhotics are no longer distinguished in Nachiring, the different reflexes of */ɾ/ in Nachiring and Kulung enables us to postulate the retention of the distinction for Proto-Khambu.

The domain of morphology is where Nachiring and Kulung differ mostly from each other, especially in their verbal morphology. Nachiring and Kulung both exhibit complex biactantial verbal agreement morphology, which is characteristic for Kiranti languages. However, Nachiring shows several distinctions and forms which are either not present in Kulung or not described in the grammar by Tolsma (2006) which is the only available reference grammar for a Kiranti language of the Khambu unit.

In the pronominal system, Nachiring diverges from Kulung, e.g. in the third person singular forms, possessive prefixes, demonstrative pronouns or interrogative pronouns. The case systems in Nachiring and Kulung exhibit similar morphemes, but with some differences in function assignment. Nachiring exhibits a plural morpheme *-mou* and a dual suffix *-ci*, while Kulung only has a non-singular *-ci* (*~ -c ~ -s*).

Within verbal morphology, the most intriguing feature of Nachiring is the existence of a non-past morpheme *-d(V)*. This morpheme is absent in Kulung. As a consequence, the intransitive and transitive paradigms of Nachiring diverge quite strongly from the Kulung paradigms. Otherwise in Kiranti, a dental morpheme *-t(V)* or *-d(V)* usually covers past function¹⁷ except for Dumi (cf. van Driem 1993), Athpare (cf. Ebert 1997) and Lohorung (cf. van Driem n.d.). In Dumi, a dental suffix is likewise used to express non-past tense, in Athpare *-t* is a non-past marker and in Lohorung a dental suffix expresses perfective aspect. Further research on Nachiring may prove fruitful for the investigation of these morphemes and the question of their etymological connection.

	Nachiring	Kulung	Correspondence
language	<i>ruu</i>	<i>riŋ</i>	/ʉ/ vs. /i/
water leech	<i>lu(ber)</i>	<i>li</i>	
field (dry)	<i>yu</i>	<i>yi</i>	
banana	<i>liŋəksi</i>	<i>liŋo:si</i> (archaic: /ə/ vs. /o/)	<i>liŋoksi</i>
pig	<i>bhə</i>	<i>bo:</i>	
soil	<i>bəhə</i>	<i>boho</i>	
leg	<i>lə</i>	<i>loŋ</i>	
neck	<i>pəi</i>	<i>poi</i>	
penis	<i>li</i>	<i>le</i>	/i/ vs. /e/
urine	<i>tshimlou</i>	<i>chema</i>	
long	<i>bhaip</i>	<i>baip</i>	/bh/ vs. /b/
arrow	<i>bhei</i>	<i>bei</i>	
grave	<i>rem</i>	<i>gem</i>	/r/ vs. /g/

¹⁷ See for example Rutgers (1998) for Yamphu, Borchers (2008) for Sunwar, Opgenort (2014) for Tilung or Jacques et al. (2012) for Khaling.

body	<i>ram</i>	<i>gam</i>	
to laugh	<i>rima</i>	<i>gema</i>	
stone	<i>lu</i>	<i>luŋ</i>	zero vs. /ŋ/
flower	<i>bu</i>	<i>buŋ</i>	

Table 4. Selected sound correspondences between Nachiring and Kulung

Verb stem alternations as described for Kulung in Tolsma (2006), are also found in Nachiring, but sometimes with diverging stem allomorphy. Several verbs are identical in both languages in their infinitive forms, but show different stem alternations. For example, an interesting stem alternation is attested in the Nachiring verb *khaim* ‘to go’, where the stem is *khət-* for the first person and *kbat-* for all other persons. In Kulung, the stem of *khaima* ‘to go’ is *khat-* for all persons (cf. Tolsma 2006: 188).

Several other verbal forms are present in Nachiring which are not accounted for or found in the Kulung grammar. A very frequent one is the progressive morpheme *-gəŋ* which is probably derived from an auxiliary or compound verb, for example in *khəp-gəŋ-ci* [cry-PROG-DU] ‘they two were crying’ or *hapa-lam ta-gəŋ-dan?* [where-ABL come-PROG-NPT.2SG] ‘Where are you coming from?’. A more detailed account on the grammar of Nachiring and the differences and similarities to Kulung must wait until the study of Nachiring has progressed.

Concerning the lexicon, Nachiring and Kulung are very similar. Some of the Nachiring lexemes have a phonological form which is only attested in Kulung as an archaic variant, such as the Nachiring *liŋəksi* for ‘banana’ cognate to Kulung *liŋo:si* with an archaic form *liŋoksi* (cf. Tolsma 2006: 255). Nachiring seems to preserve a more archaic phonological state in some lexemes. Other lexemes again are not readily recognizable as cognates and are quite distinct. Table 5 lists a selection of these diverging lexemes in Nachiring and Kulung.

	Nachiring	Kulung
hill	<i>mulu</i>	<i>ko:m</i>
jungle	<i>saulu</i>	<i>so:go</i>
spider	<i>gotsu</i>	<i>punchiri</i>
maize	<i>bəpsus</i>	<i>khobop</i>
day after tomorrow	<i>tsinkule</i>	<i>chindi</i>
dog	<i>huk ~ fuga</i>	<i>kheb</i>
leopard	<i>kip ~ kipa</i>	<i>nari</i>
white	<i>paplem</i>	<i>omlo:pa</i>
head	<i>taklo</i>	<i>toŋ</i>
skin	<i>fiou</i>	<i>sokowar</i>
millet	<i>tsertsa</i>	<i>lis</i>
intestines	<i>tho</i>	<i>ciskhil</i>

face	<i>ŋayuwa (archaic: ŋaliwar)</i>	<i>ŋobo</i>
shoulder	<i>thap</i>	<i>bouto</i>
elbow	<i>laphe</i>	<i>khacalu</i>
calf (anat.)	<i>dəŋ</i>	<i>kai</i>
tree	<i>pu</i>	<i>si:cho</i>
firewood	<i>su</i>	<i>siŋ</i>
name	<i>nu</i>	<i>niŋ</i>
over there, yonder	<i>yakku</i>	<i>na:kə</i>
why	<i>udhə</i>	<i>upi, uroi</i>
whereto	<i>haki ~ ki</i>	<i>da:loi</i>
how much	<i>udhe</i>	<i>deppoi</i>

Table 5. Diverging lexemes in Nachiring and Kulung

In sum, a first comparative inspection suggests, that Nachiring and Kulung are – as expected – two closely related languages within the Khambu unit, but at the same time clearly two distinct languages with differences in phonology, grammar and lexicon. A closer investigation of Nachiring is thus promising, both from a comparative and descriptive point of view.

6 Discussion

This first field report has shown that the degree of endangerment of Nachiring is much higher than estimated. With a few hundred speakers left, the language ranks among highly endangered languages and since the generation of young parents has abandoned the language, Nachiring can be assessed as ‘moribund’ in the terms of Krauss (1992: 4), ‘severely endangered’ by Krauss (2007), ‘seriously/severely endangered’ following Wurm (1991), or between ‘disappearing’ and ‘moribund’ in the scale by Grenoble/Whaley (2006). First observations of language usage are alarming in the sense that Nachiring has almost completely lost its role as default means of communication. The domains of language usage are drastically decreasing in favour of the national lingua franca Nepali, which is the language of education, media and administration. Positively, the Nachiring community expresses positive attitudes towards their language and is aware of the critical situation. However, the average age of the youngest fluent speakers is among 50 years. The younger Nachiring partially still have good passive understanding of the language, but do not actively use it anymore and – what is especially alarming – not with their children. Intergenerational transmission of Nachiring is therefore interrupted.

In general, the vitality of the Nachiring language is misrepresented in the Nepal Census 2011 data, in the Ethnologue and in the sociolinguistic survey on Nachiring reported to LinSuN, probably due to socio-political circumstances which led to the emphasis of the ethnolinguistic identity and affiliation, but not representing the linguistic proficiency and actual usage of the language. The above discussion has furthermore shown that a careful distinction between ethnicity and linguistic

competence should be made in the case of Nachiring. Since the number of ethnic Nachiring people is significantly higher than the number of actual speakers, a wrong count can be utterly misleading with regard to the level of endangerment of the language. Furthermore, there have been misunderstandings based on the ethnic affiliation of speakers of Sottoring or Kulung which consider themselves ethnic Nachiring, but do not speak Nachiring proper.

From a linguistic point of view, a comprehensive description of Nachiring, as a typologically intriguing language with complex verbal agreement, is valuable and promising, since the Khambu unit of the Central Kiranti branch is not yet represented with extensive documentation. The Kulung grammar by Tolsma (2006), although certainly valuable, is rather concise, while Sampang and Sām lack modern linguistic descriptions completely. Data on Nachiring will enable first comparative work on Khambu and may prove highly relevant for Kiranti historical-comparative linguistics. The documentation and linguistic description of Nachiring, before the elderly generation of fluent speakers is gone, is an urgent matter for the linguistics of the Himalayan region in general.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABL	ablative	PROG	progressive
DU	dual	SG	singular
NPT	non-past		

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